DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 272 895 CS 209 985

AUTHOR Sunflower, Cherlyn; Crawford, Leslie W.
TITLE How Frequently Are Elementary Students Writing?
PUB DATE [85]
NOTE 21p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Content Area Writing; *Curriculum Development; Elementary Education; Student Needs; Teaching Methods; *Time on Task; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Research

ABSTRACT

A study examined elementary school writing instruction to determine (1) how frequently students are writing, (2) when in the curriculum writing occurs, and (3) in what forms the writing occurs. Data were collected in 75 elementary classrooms in 25 midwestern schools during a 15-day period. The data deviated little from what D. Graves reported in 1978. While one third of the elementary teachers were giving some--although an inadequate amount of--writing instruction (one or more times per week), two-thirds of the teachers were giving little (less than once a week) to no instruction in writing. Writing was typically associated with language arts (64% of the time), particulary spelling and reading activities. Only 9% of the observed writing was associated with subject areas such as science, social studies, health, mathematics, and art. Composing was limited to only a few forms--sentences, stories, and letters. (Author/HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED272895

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Abstract

How Frequently Are Elementary Students Writing

by
Cherlyn Sunflower
and
Leslie W. Crawford
Moorhead State University
Moorhead, MN

An observational study of elementary instructional writing practices investigated three questions: 1) How frequently are elementary students writing? 2) When in the total school curriculum does writing occur? 3) What forms of writing occurred? Observers were trained to recognize writing, identify the steps of the writing process and to record observations of writing instruction. Data was collected in 75 elementary classrooms within 25 midwestern schools during a 15 day period. Procedure categories were developed to classify the data.

Data from the study deviate little from what Graves reported in 1978. While one third of the elementary teachers are doing some although an inadequate amount of written instruction (one time or more a week), two thirds of the teachers are doing little (less than once a week) to no instruction in writing. Writing was typically associated with Language Arts (64% of the time) particularly spelling and reading activities. Only 9% of the observed writing was associated with subject areas such as Science, Social Studies, Health, Math, Art, etc. Composing was limited to only a few forms - sentences, stories, and letters.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Cherlyn Sunflower

Leslie W. Crawford

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS 209 985

How Frequently Are Elementary Students Writing?

Cherlyn H. Sunflower and Leslie W. Crawford

During the last decade, there has been a public outcry as to students' (K-12) literacy in general and in particular students' writing abilities. While educators are attending an increasing amount of inservice on writing instruction there is also an increased emphasis in the current literature on the writing process, yet little is known about the application of this attention to the actual instruction students receive. In order to know if change is occurring, information must be collected on how frequently students are writing.

Applebee (1981) completed an extensive observation and survey study of the frequency of writing that secondary students do in the various subject areas. The instructional picture that Applebee found was quite bleak. The secondary students used writing primarily in fill-in-the-blank/short answer tasks and in note taking. Writing of a paragraph length or longer was rare. These practices clearly violated recommendations indicated by research (Graves, 1984).

If the situation is as bleak as Applebee found it at the secondary level, what is happening at the elementary school level? To answer this concern, three major questions needed to be addressed:

1. How frequently are elementary students writing?
2. Where in the total school curriculum does writing occur? (i.e., Does writing occur across the curriculum?)
3. What forms of writing occurred?

An observational study was designed in order to gather detailed information on current practices in elementary schools (without the complications introduced by self-report data). Prior to the study

pre-service teachers were taught as a part of a methods course: 1) to recognize writing and 2) to record observations of writing instruction.

First, the observers (pre-service teachers) were taught how to distinguish between writing and other pencil and paper type activities. For the purpose of this study, writing was defined as a process in which a student creates and then puts his or her own thoughts down in print in units of at least a word. This definition excluded 1) filling in blanks on a worksheet when the answer was predetermined and 2) copying words that were not the students' own creation/idea.

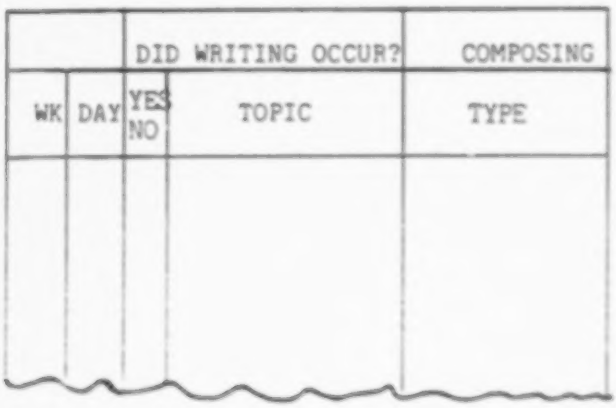
Next, the observers were taught how to record what they observed. Accuracy was developed through over twenty hours of instruction. Instruction included: 1) theory presentation; 2) demonstrations of various kinds of writing plus the observers' identification and oral description of the writing; 3) micro-teaching by the observers of preplanned writing lessons of various types with discussion and written accounts of their observations; 4) designing of writing lessons by the observers with feedback from the researcher. After a pilot studies (Fall 1983 and Spring 1984) data collection procedures had been modified and revised to achieve over 95% interrater reliability on recognizing writing activities.

During October, 1984 observational data was collected in 75 elementary classrooms. Classrooms included grades 1-6: 15 first grade classrooms, 17 second grade classrooms, 16 third grade classrooms, 10 fourth grade classrooms, 2 fourth/fifth grade combination classrooms, 8 fifth grade classrooms, and 7 sixth grade classrooms. All observations occurred all day each day during the same three week period (15 days). Twenty-five public and private schools in urban, small

town, and rural areas in the upper midwest were represented.

Over the last two years inservice (in one of the larger school districts included in the study) had emphasized writing instruction. This inservice consisted of approximately thirty hours of instruction and was offered to teachers at one grade level per year, but instruction was not offered at all schools in the district. One of the private (church) schools also offered six hours of inservice in writing instruction.

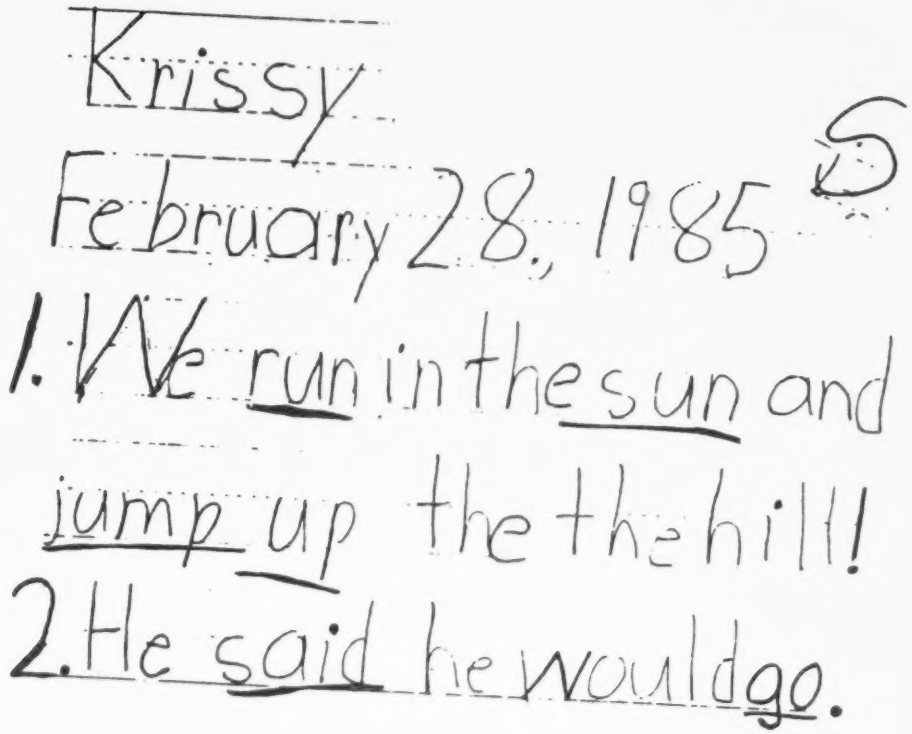
The format used to report observations was a daily log of writing activities. The log format included the date, the topic or subject area around which writing occurred, and the type (form) of composing required. (See Daily Observation Log Format, Figure 1.)



Daily Observation Log Format

Figure 1

In addition observers collected or photocopied at least one example of the elementary students' writing for each writing that occurred. (See Activities Reported as Writing, Figure 2.)



Activity Reported As Writing

Figure 2

Of the 75 collected observational logs, 74 logs were returned in usable form. Two raters (one of the researchers and a trained research assistant) read each written account of the activities reported in the daily logs and determined if the activity reported was indeed writing. Then for each actual writing activity, categories were developed to classify the placement and form of the writings. Finally the raters coded each writing activity according to placement in the elementary curriculum and according to the form of composing. Raters added and revised categories until information from the daily logs could be classified with at least 95% agreement between the two observers.

How Frequently Are Elementary Students Writing?

There were 1110 opportunities for writing to occur in these 74 classrooms during the 15 day period, if only one writing was to occur at some time during the day in each classroom. No data was collected on 30 potential instances (days) due to parent conferences in some school districts. This resulted in 1080 days of recorded data. (See Days of Recorded Data, Figure 3.)

Number of Opportunities for Writing (74 classrooms x 15 days)	1110	100%
"No School" Days	30	3%
Days of Recorded Data	1080	97%

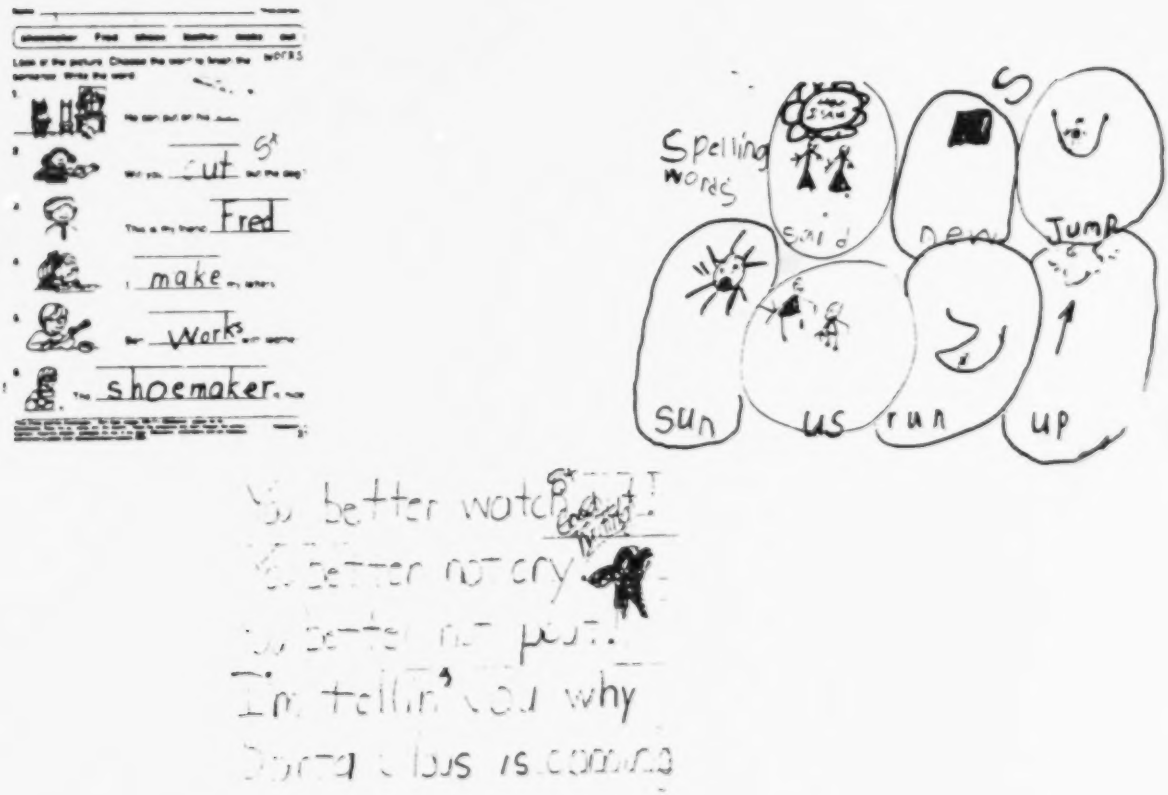
Days of Recorded Data
Figure 3

Writing occurred 229 times on 207 different days. No writing occurred on 873 days. Thus writing occurred in 19.2% of the opportunities. While no writing occurred in 80.8% of the opportunities. (See Days on Which Writing Occurred, Figure 4.)

Days of Recorded Data	1080	100%
Days on Which No Writing Occurred	873	80.8%
Days on Which 229 Writing Occurred	207	19.2%

Days on Which Writing Occurred
Figure 4

More teachers assumed they were including writing in the curriculum than actually were. Many activities defined by teachers as composing were really copying and illustrating spelling words, filling in blanks with predetermined words, and completing handwriting activities. (See Non-Writing Activities Reported as Writing, Figure 6.)



Examples of Activities Reported as Writing

Figure 6

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

These results on the low frequency of writing activities were remarkably similar to the findings in two smaller pilot studies carried out during Fall 1983 and Spring 1984. (See Figure 7, Pilot Study Results on Frequency of Writing Opportunities.) In 73 different classrooms, 228 writings were reported. (Note: These reported writings were not confirmed as actual writing activities.) This data also indicates that more writing appears to be done in the second and third grades (29% and 27% of the opportunities for writing are used). Writing in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades appears much lower (16.4%, 17%, 18.5% of the daily opportunities were used). Writing in the first grade was the lowest (12% of the daily opportunities) despite research by Chomsky ( ) that children can start writing as early as three years.

	1st grade 15 classrooms	2nd grade 16 classrooms	3rd grade 15 classrooms	4th grade 11 classrooms	5th grade 7 classrooms	6th grade 9 classrooms	TOTAL 73 different classrooms
WEEK 1 (5 days)	12/75*	27/80	24/75	12/55	11/35	11/45	95/365** 26.6%
WEEK 2	8/75	25/80	22/75	10/55	6/35	8/45	79/365 21.6%
WEEK 3	7/75	18/80	15/75	5/55	1/35	6/45	52/365 14%
TOTAL***	27/225 12%	70/240 29%	61/225 27%	27/165 16.4%	18/105 17%	25/135 18.5%	228/1095 20.8%

* 15 classrooms x 5 days = 75 opportunities for writing
** 73 classrooms x 5 days = 365 opportunities for writing
*** Writing experiences during 3 week period divided by TOTAL writing opportunities during 3 week period

Pilot Study Results on Frequency of Writing Opportunities

Figure 7

Discussion

Experts (Lickteig, 1981; Madden, 1980; Graves, 1978) have recommended children need daily opportunities for writing. Lickteig (1981, p. 47) stated "While instruction and evaluation may be helpful, the more valuable opportunity is the actual writing practice, the expression of ideas." One of Madden's (1980) rules for a successful writing program is daily writing. Yet, according to Donald Graves (1978, p. 636) little to no writing is occurring in our schools. He stated "Writing is extolled, worried over, cites as a national priority, but seldom practiced."

Data from our observational study deviates little from what Graves reported in 1978. While writing is occurring in the elementary schools, the total amount of writing is quite small. One third of the elementary teachers are providing opportunities for their students to do some writing, although an inadequate amount. Unfortunately, two thirds of the teachers are providing their students little or no opportunities for writing. When the quantity of current practice is contrasted with the frequent daily opportunities that children need to acquire writing skills, instruction is insufficient. This is occurring despite the fact that many elementary schools are required by the state boards of education to devote one third of the day to communications/language arts. These low figures do not consider the quality of instruction nor the type of writing experiences the students are receiving.

Where in the Total School Curriculum Does Writing Occur?

Of the 229 times writing did take place, the majority of the writing (64%) was directly associated with Language Arts. Within the Language Arts area 28 writings were associated with spelling (Write a sentence for each spelling word.) and 28 writings were related to reading. The rest (90) were writing for the sake of learning to write. Only 9% of the observed writing was associated with Science, Social Studies, Health, Math, Music, Physical Education, Art, or Religion (Parochial Schools). Another 22% of the children's writings were associated with a holiday; a classroom situation, or a current event. Writing in daily diary occurred in 5% of the writings. (See Figure 8, Placement of Writing in the Elementary Curriculum.)

Figure 8

Placement of Writing in the Elementary Curriculum

CURRICULAR AREA INTEGRATION	Frequency	Percent
I. LANGUAGE ARTS AREA	146	64%
Language Arts/English	90	
Spelling	28	
Reading	26	
Book Reports	2	
II. OTHER SUBJECT AREAS	20	9%
Math	1	
Science	4	
Science Field Trip	1	
Social Studies	1	
Social Studies Field Trip	1	
Health	3	
Mental Health	1	
Physical Education	1	
Music	1	
Art	1	
Religion (Parochial Schools)	5	
III. ACTUAL EVENTS	63	27%
Holiday	40	
Classroom Situation	5	
School Events	1	
Current Events	5	
Daily Diary	12	
TOTAL NUMBER OF WRITINGS	229	100%

Discussion

Writing across the curriculum was not evident. When writing occured in the elementary school curriculum, it was usually associated with language arts or holiday activities. Writing was not integrated with other subject areas in the school curriculum. Writing appeared to be viewed as an additional subject area to be added to an already "full" school day. This may be why so many teachers say there is no time for writing.

The purposes for students' writings observed in this study were limited. In contrast with what Applebee (1981) found at the secondary level (Secondary teachers stressed subject area concepts.), when elementary teachers included writing in the curriculum, they appeared to stress writing for the "sake of learning to write". Very few functional or personal reasons for writing were developed. In this study elementary teachers (like the secondary teachers in Applebee's study) did not encourage writing 1) as an initial stage of grappling with new concepts, 2) for exploring personal experience, or 3) for functional purposes.

The danger in limiting writing to textbook type exercises is that children may learn writing is a meaningless activity or children may learn how to write but never learn when to use writing. This type of "purposeless practice" may produce adults who can write, but won't.

What Forms of Writing Occurred?

The forms of writing were grouped according to four levels of difficulty. These levels were dictation level, word level, sentence level, paragraph and extended paragraph level. (See Levels and Forms of Composing, Figure 9.)

Dictation level writing included a pupil dictating his/her thoughts to an adult or older student who did the writing. The pupil may or may not have copied what was dictated. Dictation occurred in 6% of the observed writing.

Word level writing included labeling a picture, making lists, filling in blanks (when the student used his/her own ideas) and writing short answer responses (ie. writing words or phrases in response to questions). Word level writing occurred in 11% of the reported writings. This percentage is notably low because observers later reported that many "fill in the blank" activities were not perceived as composing and therefore were not recorded.

Composing at the sentence level included completing a sentence pattern, expanding a given sentence, putting spelling words into sentences, writing definitions for words, creating questions and true/false statements, and writing one sentence for each of a sequence of three or four pictures. Sentence level composing occurred in 32% of the writings.

Composing at the paragraph and extended paragraph level included summaries, stories/story endings, plays, autobiographies, cards and letters, journals, descriptions, reports, and speeches. Paragraph and extended paragraph level composing occurred in 51% of the observed writings. Within the paragraph and extended paragraph level, the

Figure 9
Levels and Forms of Composing

LEVELS OF COMPOSING	Frequency	Percent
I. DICTATION LEVEL	14	6%
Descriptors:		
Pupil dictated to teacher and teacher wrote	1	
Pupil copied from what was dictated to teacher	13	
II. WORD LEVEL	26	11%
Descriptors:		
Labels	2	
Words	6	
Fill in the blank/short answer	8	
Lists	10	
III. SENTENCE LEVEL	73	32%
Descriptors:		
Spelling words in sentences	19	
Sentences/questions	44	
True/false statements	2	
Pattern sentences	4	
Expanding given sentences	3	
Definitions	1	
IV. PARAGRAPH/EXTENDED PARAGRAPH LEVEL	118	51%
Descriptors:		
Paragraphs	13	
Plays and Conversations	2	
Summaries	2	
Book Reviews	1	
Stories/Story Endings	46	
Tall Tales	2	
Revised Fairy Tales	1	
Autobiographies	1	
Poems	7	
Limericks	1	
Riddles	1	
Letters	17	
Get Well Cards, Invitations, Thank You Letters, Apology Letters, Other Letters		
Recipes	2	
Epigraphs	1	
Prayers	1	
Creeds	1	
Lyrics	1	
How to....(Directions)	1	
Reports	3	
Speeches	1	
Interviews	1	
Diaries	12	
TOTALS	229	100%

story and the letter were the most frequent forms requested of elementary students, 39 times and 17 times respectively. Other forms such as riddles, recipes, directions, prayers, lyrics, reports, speeches, and autobiographies occurred infrequently.

Discussion

Elementary children need a variety of forms as models in which to express thoughts. Clear and decisive purposes for writing govern the forms chosen. Chambers (1983) charted twelve major writing forms: lists, diaries, announcements, letters, "forms", directions, explanations, descriptions, reports, stories, biographies/autobiographies, and poems. (See Chamber's Major Writing Forms, Figure 10.) To Chambers' twelve forms could be added dictation and word level writing.

Teachers need to find meaningful ways for exposing children to a variety of forms as models in which children can present their ideas. When compared to Chambers' forms (1983), teachers in this study were only having children write using sentence, paragraph, story, letter, diaries, and poetry forms. Reports, explanatory and descriptive writings, directions, announcements, biographies, journals and logs were observed infrequently.

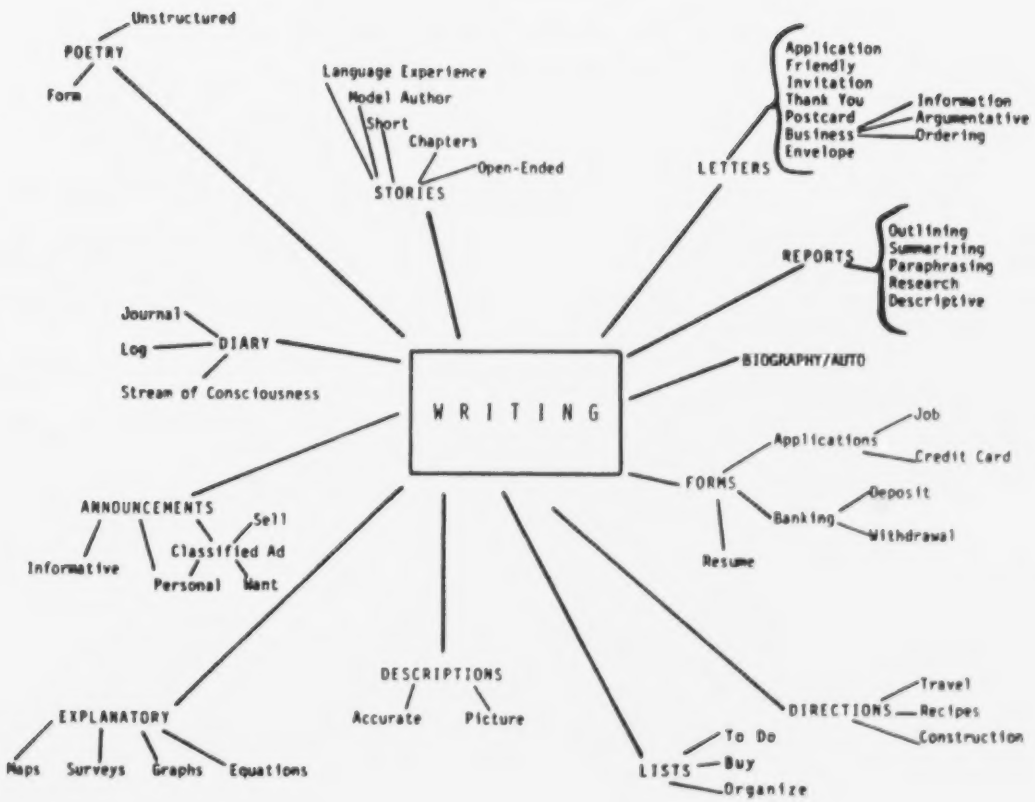


Figure 10

Chambers' Major Writing Forms

It is understandable that educators would stress sentence and paragraph forms with students who are just beginning to write considering the emphasis of most language arts textbooks (Graves, 1984) and the training educators have acquired in traditional writing pedagogy. Unfortunately the emphasis on these forms also limits children. Form is usually (hopefully) tied to purpose of writing. Children need to write for a variety of legitimate purposes (Toth, 1982; Milz, 1980). When writing for many different reasons, the need for a variety of forms in which to express thoughts becomes necessary. It appears that elementary students are neither asked to write for a variety of reasons nor taught various forms in which to express their thoughts.

Summary

This study addressed three major questions concerning writing at the elementary level. Study findings are summarized under each research question below:

How frequently are elementary student writing?

During the three week period in which teachers in this study were observed, 89 percent of the teachers were providing opportunities for writing only 0 to 2 times a week while 11 percent of the teachers were providing writing opportunities 3 to 5 times a week. More teachers must provide daily opportunities for children to write.

Where in the total school curriculum does writing occur?

Of the writing occurring in the observed classrooms 64 percent occurred for the purpose of learning to write. Only 9 percent of the

writing was noted as being integrated with other content in the elementary curriculum. This may explain why writing was not occurring more frequently. Writing appears to be perceived by teachers as a separate subject to be taught rather than as one way children may use for learning content areas such as science, social studies, health, math, etc. Writing must increase across the elementary curriculum.

What forms of writing occurred?

Elementary children need clear and decisive purposes for writing which govern the form chosen to present an idea. Without purposes, a lack of variety of forms required for becoming a good elementary writer naturally follows. Forms cited by Chambers (1983) occurring most frequently were letters and stories. Reports, explanatory and descriptive paragraphs, directions, announcement, biographies, journals and logs were observed infrequently.

When the observers asked children informally why people write, the reasons the children gave were to learn to spell, to learn to write, and for fun. These responses demonstrate that children are not learning to value writing as a means of sharing ideas with others, as a way of extending memory and organizing thinking, nor as a means of influencing others. Children's limited views of writing may indicate that educators need to change their habits as to the placement of writing instruction, ie. as an "addition" to the curriculum.

Implications

Educators need to increase the frequency, amount, and quality of writing in the elemtnary schools. In addition to this children need

to be give more reasons and taught more forms in which to express their ideas.

Writing needs to be seen as an essential communication skill. It needs to be integrated into every learning situation (area of curriculum - science, social studies, health, math, art, etc.) as well as used in the daily living aspects of school life. (See Figure 11, Language Arts: The Basis for the Integrative Curriculum.)

As more reasons are found to include writing into the school curriculum, teachers need to develop prewriting activities so that children learn to successfully put their ideas and feelings into various forms. Traditional strategies such as rote memorization of the parts of a letter or the form of a poem will not suffice in expanding students' repertoire of meaningful forms. Strategies which are tied to writing for real purposes and real audiences must be developed and incorporated into daily classroom experiences.

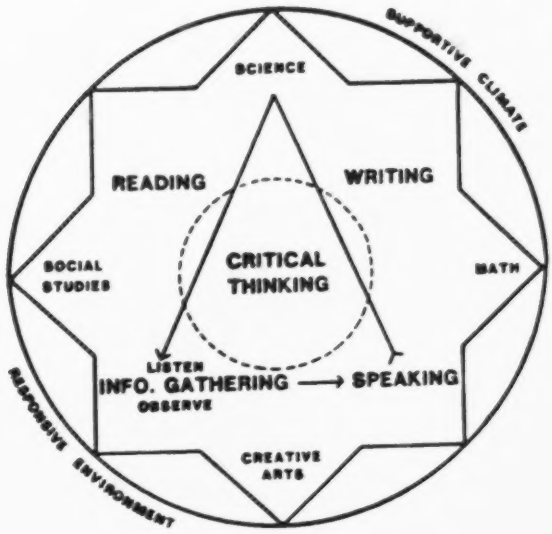


Figure 11

Language Arts: The Basis for the Integrative Curriculum

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Applebee, Arthur N. et al. (1981) Writing in the Secondary School: English and the Content Areas. NCTE Research Reports, No. 21.

Boyer, Ann Shea (1985). "On Becoming Teacher Experts Learning Through Interaction", Language Arts, Vol. 62, No. 4, April, 1983, pp. 412-419.

Chambers, Bonnie (1983). "Creating a Whole Language & Environment", Fourth Annual Fall Reading Conference, Moorhead State University, Moorhead, Minnesota.

Evans, Christine Sabray (1984). "Writing to Learn in Math", Language Arts, Vol. 61, No. 8, December, pp. 828-836.

Fulwiler, Toby (1985). "Writing and Learning, Grade Three", Language Arts, Vol. 62, No. 1, January, pp. 55-59.

Graves, Donald H. (1978). "We Won't Let Them Write", Language Arts, Vol. 55, No. 5, May, 1978, pp. 635-640.

Graves, Donald H. (1984). Researcher Learns to Write, Heineman Educational Books.

Levine, Denise Stanis. (1985). "The Biggest Thing I Learned But It Really Doesn't Have to Do with Science", Language Arts, Vol. 62, No. 1, January, pp. 43-47.

Lickteig, Sister M. Jean. (1981). "Research-Based Recommendation for Teachers of Writing", Language Arts, Vol. 58, No. 1, January, pp. 44-49.

Madden, Peter. (1980). "Every Teacher Needs a Writing Rascal", Learning, Vol. 9, No. 2, September, pp. 98-100.

Milz, Veva E. (1980). "First Graders Can Write: Focus on Communication", Theory into Practice, Volume XIX, No. 3, pp. 179-185.

Olson, Carol Booth. (1984). "Fostering Critical Thinking Skills Through Writing", Educational Leadership, Vol. 42, No. 3, November, pp. 28-39.

Robertson, Wanda. (1955). "Creating a Good Environment for Writing", When Children Write, Association for Childhood Education International, Washington, D.C., pp. 16-29.

Toth, Marian. (1982). "We Write for a Reason", Instructor, April, pp. 38-40.